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ABSTRACT

Field observations of a visiting foreign exchange scholar (English teacher) and interview responses from teachers and students are the basis for this description of an urban elementary school in Shanghai (People's Republic of China). The school day begins with group exercise, which is repeated at about 2-hour intervals throughout the school day, which lasts from the early morning to late afternoon. Conditions are spartan, but teachers put great effort into presenting their lessons. As is typical of Chinese schools, the teaching program, principles, and materials are developed and provided by the government. The urban curriculum, which is more complex than the typical rural curriculum, consists of moral education, Chinese, mathematics, natural science, biology, sociology for elementary school, English, geography, history, physical education, music, fine arts, and physical labor. Moral education is based on the "five loves"--love of motherland, people, physical labor, science, and socialism--and focuses on patriotism, collectivism, politeness, and discipline. Basic literacy in Chinese is the focus of the first 3 years. Students first learn to read and write in a form of Chinese that uses the Roman alphabet and then they move to Chinese characters. Mental and written calculation instruction is supplemented with instruction in abacus use. Physical punishment is permitted for disciplinary infractions, but children are generally well-behaved and attentive. Chinese elementary school teachers are usually women, and usually teach one subject, moving from room to room for scheduled classes. (Contains one table and two references.) (SLD)

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Running head: CHINESE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Inside an Urban Elementary School in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

Based on field observations and interview responses, Dong Tiyuhui Xiao (Sports Meet Road East Primary School), an urban elementary school located in Shanghai, China is described. Specifically, the manuscript focuses on the curriculum, teachers' and students' schedules, and classroom management characteristics.

Inside an Urban Elementary School in the People's Republic of China

It's a balmy, Wednesday, March afternoon in Shanghai, China. Spring is in the air; the camellias are ready to bloom. Since February, as a foreign exchange scholar, I have been teaching in the English Department at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). I have also been living in an apartment in the foreign specialists' residence building; an elementary school is located directly across the street. From my fourth floor balcony, I have a bird's-eye view of the school and courtyard which are surrounded by a high concrete wall.

The school serves as my morning alarm and fitness club. Every day at 7:15 a.m. the children arrive and congregate at the locked gate until the laoshi (teacher) opens it. Then, at 7:45, accompanied by prerecorded music projected by a loudspeaker, the teachers participate in daily morning exercises performed on the playground. Next, at 8:00 the students exit the building in single-file and proceed to do their morning exercises on the blacktop. Then, the national anthem is played while everyone stands at attention, and, finally, both teachers and students file into the building to start their classes. Approximately every two hours, recess occurs and, again, the same tune is played as students exercise outdoors. As the buildings in Shanghai have no heat and springtime is cold, I suspect the exercises are not only for fitness but also to create body heat. Finally, at 2:30 the afternoon exercises occur, followed by the

national anthem (again!). School is dismissed in late afternoon.

After viewing the school from my perch for two months, I finally visited the inside of the school. The SISU Waiban Office (International Office) must arrange school visits. However, they had been remiss. So, finally, I walked over to Dong Tiyuhui Xiao (both the name of the elementary school and the street location), introduced myself using basic Chinese that I had studied for two years, and received an invitation to enter. What an experience! I visited grade 1 Chinese, math, music, and physical education classes. With camera and notebook in hand, I attempted to sit in the back and observe. I was treated like a celebrity as students and teachers eagerly said in English, "Hello," and "How are you?" and then they conversed quickly in Chinese. I, of course, smiled and said, "Hello. I am fine. Your English is very good,"--instant friendships formed!

While observing classes, the teachers maintained attention; the children were exceptionally well-behaved. Again, the teaching conditions were like those of SISU--cement walls and floors, gray walls, and no heat. The teachers earned an "A" for effort as they decorated the walls, used magnet boards and overhead projectors, and attempted to teach more than 50 Chinese children per classroom.

After the brief, half-day stay, I was eager to learn more about elementary education in China. I arranged five full-day Friday observations. To augment my visits, one afternoon I interviewed Remmey, an American student who attended the school

for the past year. Remmey, a 10-year-old female from Pennsylvania, lived with her older brother and father two floors below my apartment. Her father was also an exchange scholar at SISU. Although in grade 4 in the States, she was placed in grade 3 in Shanghai. Remmey was tall, thin, and mature beyond her years. She eagerly answered my interview questions.

In order to obtain a Chinese perspective, I also questioned Mr. Zhou, a pharmacist by day and at night a teacher of English. I met Mr. Zhou at the English corner at Luxun Park. Here, every Sunday from 9:00 a.m. until noon, the Chinese rehearsed English phrases among themselves. If English-speaking persons entered the English corner, they were instantly approached by numerous Chinese eager to discover if their English was accurate. In this way I met Mr. Zhou.

Based on observation and interview responses, I gleaned insightful information regarding Dong Tiyuhui Xiao (Sports Meet Road East Primary School), an urban elementary school located in Shanghai, China. The purpose of this article is to describe the curriculum, teachers' and students' schedules, and classroom management characteristics.

Curriculum

Q: *How old are students when they start elementary school?*

Zhou: Seven.

Q: *Who determines the subjects that are taught?*

Zhou: All the subjects are collectively chosen by the State.

Q: *If I visited ten different elementary schools, would I*

find the same subjects offered?

Zhou: Yes.

Q: *How are textbooks and materials selected?*

Zhou: Selected by the State Committee of Education.

Q: *At what grade is English introduced?*

Zhou: Grade 3.

Q: *Is English taught in every elementary school?*

Zhou: In Shanghai, yes.

The goals of elementary education in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are "to enable young children to develop morally, intellectually, physically, and aesthetically; to lay a foundation for the improvement of the national quality; and to cultivate the socialist citizens with ideals, morality, and discipline" (Education in China, 1989, p. 2).

Due to the uneven development among diverse regions, elementary education includes five-year and six-year programs. Three types of schools exist: full-time elementary, rural elementary, and simple elementary. In full-time elementary schools the teaching program, principles, and materials are formulated and compiled by the State Education Commission, the national administrative authority for the education system in the PRC. Each province, city, and autonomous region may make modifications in accordance with their own characteristics. Rural elementary schools teach only Chinese, arithmetic, general knowledge, and moral lessons. Simple elementary schools operate in various ways: part-time, alternate days, and mobile teaching

where the emphasis is on Chinese and arithmetic. The enrollment age is seven with flexibility for sparsely populated minority areas.

Dong Tiyuhui Xiao is a five-year (grades 1-5), full-time elementary school. Students attend school six days a week (Monday-Saturday), September-June. The school year is divided into two terms separated by the movable Chinese New Year which usually falls in February.

Housed in two multi-storied buildings within a walled compound, the grade 1-5 curriculum consists of moral education, Chinese, mathematics, natural science, biology, sociology for elementary school, English, geography, history, physical education, music, fine arts, and physical labor. Moral education is based on the "five loves"--love of motherland, people, physical labor, science, and socialism--and focuses on patriotism, collectivism, politeness, and discipline. Physical labor necessitates labor sites where children perform tangible community services or tasks.

During the first three years of school, basic literacy in the Chinese language is emphasized. As proficiency in Chinese requires memorizing several hundred characters, reading, writing, listening, and speaking lessons are frequent. Students first learn to read and write in Pinyin, a method of writing the language using the Roman alphabet, and then transfer the knowledge to Chinese characters.

Three methods of calculation embrace the teaching of

mathematics: oral (mental calculation), written calculation, and calculation with an abacus. Negative numbers, percentages, ratios, proportions, as well as some elementary statistics, are also taught. English and sociology for elementary school are introduced in grade 3; geography and biology are taught in upper elementary grades. Rounding out the grade 1-3 curriculum are moral education, nature, physical education and health, music, fine arts, calligraphy, and physical labor. Self-study enhances specific study skills.

Teachers' and Students' Schedules

Q: *What's the name of the Chinese school that you attend?*

Remmey: Dong Tiyuhui Xiao. They're named after the streets.

Q: *Let's talk about a typical school day. You start school at...*

Remmey: ...at 7:45.

Q: *Then what happens?*

Remmey: Then we fool around until the teachers are done doing their exercises, and we do morning exercises in the main playground. If it's raining, we don't do exercises, and the national anthem and the flag goes up where everybody's supposed to salute, but usually I just stand at attention. Then we all go back in to start the normal class.

Q: *What's the first class?*

Remmey: It matters on the day because the classes are different...

Q: *Let's talk about Friday.*

Remmey: We have half-a-day of school on Friday.

Q: *What's the first class you have on Tuesday?*

Science class and then we have math and then we have music and then we have gym and then we have lunch from 11:30 to 1:00, and I come back here to eat lunch, and I have a Chinese class during my lunch period and then I go back on Tuesday and have two yuwen (Chinese language) classes. After the two classes, then we have our special class (Chinese writing) that we only have on Tuesday where we stay late at school. But before that we have another exercise and before that the flag goes down, and we have eye exercises. In between every class we have a break.

In general, the weekly schedule consists of six 45-minute classes: four in the morning and two in the afternoon with a lengthy lunch break providing time to take "wushui," the traditional Chinese nap. Monday through Thursday, the school day commences at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 3:00 p.m. On Friday, the students are dismissed at 11:45; however, the teachers are required to attend political meetings in the afternoon. On Saturday, three classes are held from 8:00 to 11:45. At 9:45 every morning to prerecorded music played over the public announcement system, the entire student body engages in eye exercises. These consist of four series of facial self-massage. In summary, the total number of student classes per week is 33. On the other hand, the teachers are scheduled 12 to 14 classes

with the remainder of their time allocated for preparation and study.

In contrast to the United States where both female and male elementary teachers instruct a variety of subjects, Chinese elementary teachers are usually female and teach one subject. Also, unlike the American system whereby teachers are assigned one class for most of the day, most Chinese teachers travel to their students' homerooms for scheduled classes. Between each class is a ten-minute break; here students relax or play. When the teacher claps her hands, attention is immediately restored. Table 1 presents the grade 1 course schedule for Dong Tiyuhui Xiao.

[insert Table 1 here]

Classroom Management Strategies

Q: *How many students are in your class?*

Remmey: 53 and it's a pretty small room.

Q: *What about discipline? What if someone acts out in class?*

Remmey: Well, you go in and get whippings with a yardstick either on your hand or butt, and you must march correctly from first grade.

Q: *If you're not marching correctly, what happens?*

Remmey: (She demonstrates by squeezing my ear lobe firmly.) They pull your ear but actually very hard. I watched them do it in front of me, and they don't do it to me because they're trying to be careful, and they turn around, and I

see a couple tear streaks.

Q: *What kind of behavior merits punishment?*

Remmey: Cheating or being rude for five times or more. If you do it for the first time, then she gives you a warning. If you do it two times, then she separates you out into the hall. If you do it three times, she kind of loses her patience and gives you an ear yanking; four times or five times then watch out!

Most Chinese hold high regard for education and respect for authority (Hu & Grove, 1991). During my visits, the children were attentive, respectful, and exceptionally well-behaved. I did not witness any whippings or ear yankings. Perhaps the Chinese value of "loss of face" contributed to the their disciplined behaviors. According to Hu & Grove (1991), "loss of face occurs when a person's set of claims is implicitly or explicitly called into question by others" (p. 115). So, rather then face embarrassment by receiving a warning, a whipping, or an ear yanking, youngsters display their best behaviors.

A Grade 1 Chinese Lesson

When the teacher or laoshi appeared at the door for her scheduled Chinese class, the students rose and said in unison, "Laoshi, hao!" (teacher, hello). On a word from the young, female teacher, the first graders seated themselves, and the class began.

Approximately 50 children occupied four rows of two-person wooden desks, six or seven desks deep. The youngsters were

dressed in green and white uniforms, each complemented by a green scarf. The classroom's cement walls were decorated with posters and charts. On the back blackboard Chinese characters and original drawings completed in colored chalk adorned the slate. Displayed over the front chalkboard were the Chinese flag and a Chinese adage urging diligent work and study: "Knowledge is power." Open windows on one side of the room provided natural light and ventilation; florescent lights hung from the ceiling.

Using a character recognition "flashcard" exercise, the teacher stood behind her center-front podium and taught. She displayed a card, most of the children raised their hands, and the child who was chosen stood to respond. The teacher provided feedback in the form of yes, good, and then the child was instructed to sit. Next, the teacher wrote characters on the chalkboard, explaining the order of each stroke. Either in unison or individually, the students recited the characters while the teacher pointed to them with a wooden pointer. Finally, the teacher directed the children to a page in their yuwen (Chinese language) textbooks. She asked for volunteers who when called upon read confidently and loudly. She also requested the class to read altogether. Again, the recitations were well-paced and enthusiastic. When the bell rang to signal the end of the lesson, the students stood and in unison thanked the teacher.

In order to answer a question or volunteer, students always raised their hands. Never was an answer called out. Also, hand-raising was restrained and systematic. The arm was outstretched

and stationery. If not raising their hands, the children positioned their elbows on the desk or folded their arms behind their backs.

Conclusion

What can we learn from visiting Dong Tiyuhui Xiao? Overall, elementary education is disciplined education in the People's Republic of China. The curriculum is formulated by the State Education Commission; yet dependent on resources, language, and economic needs, the curriculum varies. Specifically, Dong Tiyuhui Xiao represents only one elementary school in a progressive, urban area. Schedules are rigorous; mathematics and Chinese literacy courses are emphasized. Attention, discipline, whole class instruction, recitation, and drill characterize classroom instruction. Knowledge level thinking is emphasized; details and facts are memorized. The teacher directs instructional activities and manages student behavior.

A final thought is warranted. China and the United States are culturally, politically, and linguistically different. The United States emphasizes individualism and democracy; the Chinese believe in group responsibility, collectivism, and a socialist market economy. Teaching methods which are effective in one country may not be applicable or suitable to the other.

References

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State Education Commission, The People's Republic of China. (1989). Education in China. Beijing, PRC: State Education Commission.

Table 1

Grade 1 Course Schedule: Dong Tiyuhui Xiao

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
7:40 7:55	Teachers exercise in courtyard					
8:00 8:10	Homeroom					
8:15 9:00	Moral Ed	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	PE	Chinese
9:00 9:45	Chinese	Physical Labor	PE	Math	Music	Math
9:45 10:15	Eye Exercises & Snack					
10:15 11:00	Chinese	Math	Math	Chinese	Math	Art
11:00 11:45	PE	Chinese	Music	PE	Chinese	Language self-study
11:45 1:10	Lunch (children go home)					
1:15 2:00	Music	PE	Writing	Nature	Hobby	Dismissed
2:15 3:00	Math	Math self-study	Chinese	Art	Dismissed	

Note. Moral ed = "5 loves"; PE = group calisthenics, intramural sports, extracurricular activities; math = oral (mental) calculation, written calculation, abacus; Chinese = reading, writing, listening, speaking; writing = calligraphy; nature = science; self-study = study skills.